**II**

**THE BURNED FACE PILL MAN**

“How lucky are you to come up on a deal as sweet as this?”, Denise said as we walked up the stairwell. We just reached the 18th floor. The entire building was perfect except for the fact that its literally the year 2073 and they have no elevators. I guess these people took being fit seriously.

“Nèko, what floor do you stay on again? This shit is getting lame,” she complained.

“This floor actually, apartment 1873”, I said opening the exit door. Just then a man bumped into us causing Denise to waste her drink.

“Hey man, do you think you could watch where the hell you’re going next time?”, I said grabbing him by his collar.

“Pardon Sir. Word has it old Abe’s been shot in the head,” he said panting. His face was drenched in sweat. His eyes were dilated, black, and soulless. He ran down the stairs as if the building were on fire.

“That was super crazy,” Denise said wiping her face. “He had to be on the best caps in town.”

She opened the door and we entered a dark hall that had identical doors with a light above each one. Each one had the same door mat, doorbell and plant on the left of each door. At the end of the hallway was a large window that would’ve brought in lots of natural lighting but instead it was painted solid black.

“Wow, it’s like a millionaire’s prison or something,” I said as we walked slowly down the hall. Amazed at the apartments, we hardly noticed a dark figure at the end of the in the middle of the hall, prompted up against the wall.

“Damn junky on it bad. Can’t take a trip without tripping,” the guy said.

“Excuse me?”, I asked. He began to walk closer. I could tell he had on boots as each step sounded off the closer he got. He got under the light revealing his identity. He had to be at least our age, with long curly dirty blonde hair and the side of his face was badly burned. He wore a solid white t-shirt with black jeans, and a leather biker looking jacket kind of like the greaser type of boys way back in the day. A necklace with a heart shaped locket hung from his neck and a joint rested behind his ear. He definitely didn’t look like he was from around here at all.

“You new here?”, he asked. Denise stared at him not saying a word.

“Yea. Just got the key and about to check out the place now.”

“You burn?”, he asked with no hesitation. He pulled out a small leather draw-string sack and opened it, pouring different pills into his hand. There were 3 types; a red and orange capsule, a solid black one with 3 white x’s on it, and a pink one with a blue heart on it.

Before I could say anything- “Choose your fate,” he encouraged.

I looked at Denise who was staring at the pills like food washing on shore on a stranded island.

“Are you going to start slobbering next?”, I asked her. The guy just stood there like a statue, holding his hand out waiting for us to answer.

“Never saw these before. What does each one do?”, I asked. He started laughing.

“I’ve only taken the black one. It’ll have you stuck if you’re trying to stay put,” he said.

“Well I know the one I want.”, Denise said picking up the pink capsule with the blue heart, swallowing it like nothing.

“Denise, are you fucking insane!? You don’t know what that will do to you,” I said.

“I guess I’m going to find out here shortly,” she said. I could tell she was trying to be flirty because of this guy.

“I tell you what, first ones on me. You’ll be back,” he said.

He handed me the red and orange capsule then put the sack back in his jacket pocket.

“Take it about an hour before you think you’ll doze off. Make sure you’re at home man.”, he said sincerely. “Make sure you are here at your new apartment,” he said grabbing my shoulder looking in my eyes.

“Ok man I got it. Be here at the apartment, take an hour or so before I sleep. Easy,” I said putting the capsule in my shirt pocket. He turned around and walked back down the hall.

“Hey man, what’s your name?”, I asked.

“Gene. They call me Burner.” I’ll be around. My floor is 19. I’m in Apartment 1952.”

“How endearing was that?!”, Denise said.

“You just be careful since you took that capsule and we have no idea what it does.”

We walked up to my apartment.

“1873. Well here goes nothing,” I said unlocking the door. I reached for the latch and opened the door revealing a very neat yet simple apartment. The walls, ceilings, and windows were all painted black. Even the wooden floors were black. There were a few doors to the left and one on the right, I assume lead to the kitchen, bathroom or some storage closets.

“This looks- cool. At least I won’t have to worry about it getting hot in here,” I said. Denise checked her communicator.

“It’s almost time for me to go to work. Are you sure you have all the help you need moving?”, she asked.

“Yea, besides it’s not like you were going to do much anyways. I don’t have much, Gauge, Zeke, and I really got this. I’ll talk to you later.”

*Should I call Bri Lynn to tell her about my new place?* I sat on the floor and held my communicator out. I put it back in my pocket.

*No.* *It’s best she just finds out word of mouth. I don’t want to force anything.*

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The sun started hiding behind the building and mountains that dwarfed underneath the sky. The capsule seemed to be throbbing in my pocket. My curiosity talked to me like a conscience.

“Shit, Nèko you would be on one of the highest floors in the damn building,” Zeke complained as he helped me carry my couch up the stairs. Gauge came right behind carrying a box.

“I’ll pay you immensely in food, smoke, and beer,” I laughed.

We finally got everything into the apartment. It wasn’t much but a couch, old chair and an old plasma TV, a few books shelves and books in the living room. I had just my bed, a bin of clothes, and a few posters and decorative items in my room. My kitchen was empty. I was just happy to have my own place. I’ve lived with a roommate and Brit Lynn before but never alone.

“We’re about to go head out to Slugs and get a few drinks, get on some girls, you coming?”, Gauge asked.

I reached in my pocket and pulled out the capsule that guy Gene gave me.

“Hell yea, my type of party. You got anymore?”, Zeke asked.

“No. This guy named Gene, with a burned face, just gave Denise and I these weird looking capsules. I’m really skeptical about taking it. I’ve just never seen any like this.” I said observing it. Gauge took it out my hand.

“This does look like some exclusive extraterrestrial shit. If you don’t take it give it to me.”, he said.

“I just might throw it away after you put your dirty ass hands on it,” I said snatching it back.

“Well we’re about to head out bro. Hit me up and plug me in with your burned face pill man!”, he said walking out with Zeke. I shut the door and locked it behind then. I went to the living room, plopping down on the couch and stared up at the ceiling. The entire apartment was dark except for the one lamp I had on next to the couch.

I pulled the capsule out and stared at it again. It kind of glistened a little in the light. I looked at my watch. *11:07pm. Guess I’ll see what you’re about.* Without hesitation, I swallowed it whole. My face felt hot before it could even go down my throat good. My hands and feet started tingling and then began to burn.

*What the fuck is going on? Am I allergic to this?* My vision started doubling and then getting blurry. The gravity seemed to disappear under my feet as I began to feel lighter. I headed for the bathroom sink. I tried hard to stay focus and calm. I’ve taken a lot of capsules before and almost even died one time, yet non made me feel like this. I reached for the sink and then fell to the ground as the sink started to run away from me.

*Come back!* The sink grew smaller and smaller as I reached up for it. The sink slowly faded away and then my vision went black.

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“Lee! Lee! You alright?” I could hear Brit Lynn’s sweet voice but couldn’t see anything. The blend of horse manure and humidity hit me hard like a slap to the face.

“West Lee! Chelsey has gotten out again. You know she’s gotten too big for Lee Jr. to tame her now. She doesn’t mind anyone but you.” I felt her slightly kick my leg. I opened my eyes. I was lying in a pile of hay next to a pig trough. I looked at my clothes. They definitely aren’t any that belonged to me. My hair rested in two braids tied with scraps of leather on the end.

“Where am I?”, I asked rubbing my head getting up slowly. My head spun like I’d been drinking and taking drugs all night. Britt Lynn was more beautiful than I’ve ever seen her.

“You are home honey. You and the boys got full as a tick last night. Lawson said you hit your head and passed out in here. Now let’s get you inside to eat and get settled.” She helped me up and led me out the barn doors. Nothing was what I thought. There were no sky scraping buildings, busy streets filled with people on their communicators, or bots out scanning parking meters. All I saw was land that stretched out for what appeared to be miles, horses that reframed themselves behind an open fence, and a small little street that hand about 10 houses near us.

*I must be dreaming.*

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“The Bridges Boys have been harassing these parts for years. You, Donny Ray, and Lawson have protected our property for the past 5-6 years since your Paw passed,” Brit Lynn said.

We sat at a wooden table in the kitchen. I felt like I was in a western movie. The furniture, clothes, just everything was old and out dated like I was at the renaissance section at the museum. I had the worse thirst ever when I woke up. I drank a large cup of her homemade lemonade as I explained to her about how I didn’t know how I got here or if any of this was real.

“Well I don’t know if you’re dreaming but I do know it’s the 9th of August, 1873. I know that my name is Meredith Lee and that we are married with two beautiful kids Mary Joe Lee who is 5 years old and West Lee Jr. is almost 9.

*9? I have a 9-year-old son. I have kids and I’m married? Now I know I’m dreaming.*

“I’m barely 25. How are we married with 2 kids?”, I asked.

“We got married young. It was the Summer I turned 13 and you 14. We ran away and didn’t look back. We came here and built this house ourselves. Well with the help of your Pa, Lawson, Donny, their family and a few others who later resigned here. After that others followed, building their homes and we started our own colony,” she said as she slapped a large piece of pork on an iron skillet over the stove.

“It’s crazy how you done gone and lost your memory. You must’ve hit your head mighty hard cause you ain’t dreaming Lee.” Just then, a boy with two long braids, just like mine, came in the room with no shoes or shirt on. A little girl followed after him rubbing her eyes with one hand and hold some sort of stuffed animal in the other. They were so beautiful I felt my face get hot as a tear crawled down my face. I could see an equal split of me and Brit Lynn.

“Brit Lynn, we weren’t together-”

“Who is Brit Lynn?”, she interrupted.

“I forget your name is Meredith. It’s just weird is all.” She looked at me so puzzled like she hadn’t the slightest clue about what I was talking about.

“Come here. Come to Daddy. Or Come to your Pa.” I had to remember where I was. A loud bang came to the door. Lots of rifles and other weapons lined up beside the door.

“Who’s there?”, I asked, grabbed one of the rifles. Brit Lynn or, should I say Meredith, walked calmly over to the door and opened it. It was my friends, Zeke and Gauge. They didn’t appear to be themselves either. Their appearance made them looked like two total different guys. Gauge wasn’t his normal clean cut, suave self. He had long hair to his should with a beard. Zeke also. He had long kinky hair that was unexposed under a hat. They both looked like some bad ass cowboys.

“Zeke, Gauge. Man am I happy to see you guys.” They looked at me the same way Meredith did. They must be different in the dream too. They had different looks, in a different time so I’m sure their names were different also.

“He’s a bit of a loon this morning after last night,” She said kissing my forehead.

“You hit your head some nasty last night,” Zeke said.

“You reckon we can have words out back,” Gauge said in a serious tone. So much was happening at once and all so fast. It was a bit much to intake. We walked around the back of the house.

“The Bridges brothers have broken into the shed and taken sacks of food,” Lawson said as he spits tobacco on the ground.

“We need to get our food back. Them boys need to be taught a lesson,” Donny Ray said reaching for the pistol on his hip.

“I say we head their first sight of dawn. What do you reckon we do Lee?”, he asked as they both stared at me. I could tell that I was the man with the plan here. I really don’t know what to do but I’ll have to improvise.

“Uh, uh we can head over there with a few other guys, take the food back and head back before sunrise.”, I insisted. I could tell they weren’t feeling that plan.

“What are sneaking and hiding like possums for! Let’s go in and give them boys a good whoopin’!”, Lawson demanded.

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It had to be at least 5 something in the morning. Lawson, Donny Ray, a few other guys and I all rode horses to the peak of a hill that stood over the Bridges Brothers crops and farm house. These famous brothers that kept being mentioned must really be something. They seem to be the thorn that pierced the lions paw around here.

“Lawson and I will head to the back of the house and fire shots to get them to come out. Donny Ray and the other fellas need to wait in the front of the house for them to come out. Signal me when that front door opens,” I said. I had no idea what I was saying but it’s worth a try.

“You reckon your head is well enough to shoot?”, Donny Ray asked.

“I can’t fret on that. We have to get our food back,” I replied. We left the horses behind the peak and ran the back of the barn house. Shots started to fire.

*Who’s shooting? We didn’t even make it to our mark yet.* Guns shots came from the top floor window of the farm house.

“You’re on my property Lee! By law I can kill you and your boys where you stand!” This dream felt realer than any I’ve had in my life. A whistle came from the side of the house. It was Lawson signaling that someone was above and to run near him, close to the house. I took one step and a loud gunshot exploded in ears. I stopped and couldn’t move as hot led quickly traveled through my body like I was hit by lightning.

“Lee!” I heard Lawson yell. I slowly fell to the ground. The fall felt like minutes instead of seconds. Gunshots flew slowly passed me as the world slowed down. A fly flew passed me as I fell. I catch him with my fingers. Everything got black as I finally hit the ground hard.

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*Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.* The sound of my communicator alarm faded until it screamed in my ear. I sprung up and opened my eyes. I was in my bathroom again. I felt light headed.

I looked at my communicator. 12 missed calls, a bunch of texts and some missed video messages.

*2 hours late for work. I have to find Gene.* I ran outside in the hall and up the stairwell to floor 19. I ran to Gene’s apartment. 1952. I knocked on the door hard. No answer. I put my ear to the door.

The door swung open and Gene answered with no shirt on with his arms wrapped around a naked girl. He held his hand out and it had a few red and orange capsules in it.

“You want to go back right?” He smiled.